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The Independent Fantasy Gaming Monthly

HOW DARK IS YOUR FUTURE?

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SHADOWRUN

MEET THE ICE DRAGON

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WIN THE
AXEMAN'S
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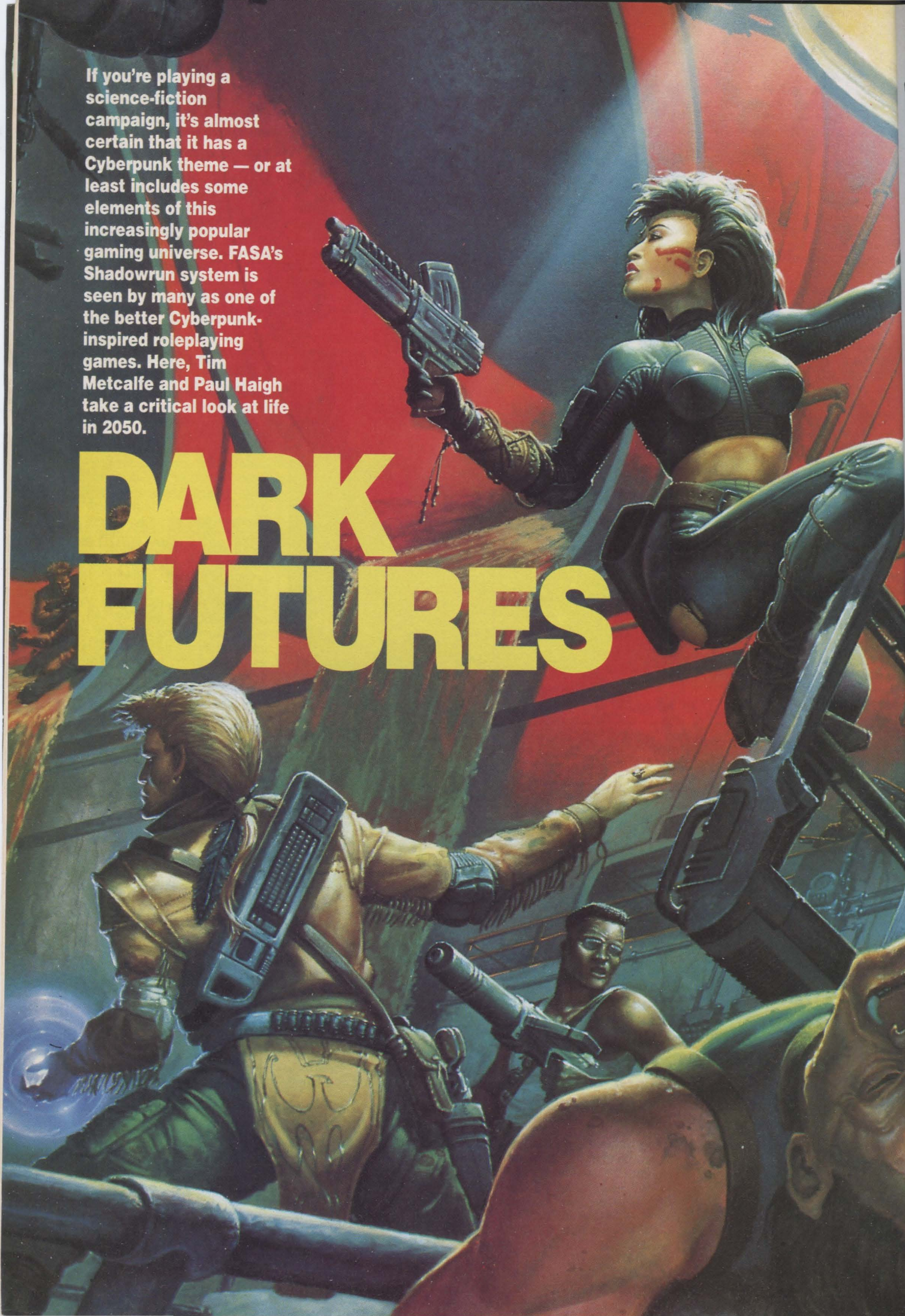


Reviewed: GURPS Cyberpunk, New Earth, Web Wars, The Prisoner, Battletroops and more...



If you're playing a science-fiction campaign, it's almost certain that it has a Cyberpunk theme — or at least includes some elements of this increasingly popular gaming universe. FASA's Shadowrun system is seen by many as one of the better Cyberpunk-inspired roleplaying games. Here, Tim Metcalfe and Paul Haigh take a critical look at life in 2050.

DARK FUTURES



"Hoi, chummer! How'd your wet-work of the wagemage with the wizworm go? Did ya geek 'im?"

"Nah, chummer. The wagemage had some hired razorguys, so I end up geeking 60 trog saraimen. The policlub gave me enough nuyen to buy the plex."

This slice of *Shadowrun* dialogue will give you a feel for the system — designed and conceived by **Bob Charrette, Paul Hume** and **Tom Dowd** for the FASA Corporation — which gives the Cyberpunk theme several new twists. One of those twists is this special 'game language'. What it means, roughly, is this: "Hello, friend. How did your assassination of the company wizard with the pet dragon go? Did you terminate him?" "No, friend. The wizard had some hired muscle, so I ended up killing 60 orc warriors. The National Front gave me enough money to buy the city."

Another twist is the system's 'historical' background, which goes a bit like this. *Shadowrun* is set in 2050 — and a lot has happened in the preceding 60 years. During the 1990s a tide of civil unrest and urban violence engulfed the world, sparked by food shortages and strikes. Throughout this crisis-torn decade, the large multi-national corporations acted to protect themselves, forming their own private armies. These corporations then gained tremendous political power rivalling, sometimes exceeding, the power of overburdened and frequently bankrupt national governments. Using their new freedom, the corporations of North America began annexing land for their own purposes. One of the results of this was the 'resettlement' of native American Indians into concentration camps, enabling the corporations to get their hand on oil-rich land formerly owned by the indian peoples.

Ironically, it was this isolation of many of the tribes in the so-called 're-education camps' which spared them from the plague which hit the world in 2010. Within a few short months, 25% of the world's population were dead or dying. Hot on the heels of this horrific plague came a different phenomenon. All over this small blue planet, mutant and 'changeling' children were being born to 'normal' parents who had survived the plague. Also at this

time, a leader arose among the indian peoples. Announced as a Shaman with strange magical powers, he led his people to demand the return of their lands. Conflict, of course, broke out, and after much fighting a solution was thrashed out which gave the indian peoples control over much of western North America. In the following decades, further mutations developed among the human population — then, on April 30, 2021, one out of every ten men and women woke up to find they had mutated into strange and sometimes hideous humanoid shapes. This process was dubbed 'goblinisation' and the unfortunate victims began to transform into 'elves, orks, dwarves and trolls.

Also during this period, magic was being rediscovered, and was found to be a powerful force. Major scientific developments continued in the fields of computer science and cybertechnology. Cyberterminals allowed a user to interface with the world data network via his or her nerve system, enabling operations to be carried out at the speed of thought. Then, in 2029, computer systems throughout the world were attacked by a virus program of unprecedented power. As the killer program spread, governments toppled and the world economy neared collapse. More wars followed as people took advantage of the situation, and many groups, including mutated humans (or metahumans) took the opportunity to make a bid for independence. When, at last, the computer virus was destroyed with the aid of specially trained Cyber-Commandos and new developments in Matrix technology. These advances soon found their way into the private sector and so, in the year 2050, cybertechnology and its associated uses is a lucrative and growing industry.

This is where the Shadowrunners — who lend their name to the game system — come in. They are mostly mercenaries who hire out their muscle and skills to the Megacorps obtaining and trading industrial secrets, as well as dabbling in a bit of espionage. This is the background to the world of *Shadowrun*, a cleverly thought out way of accounting for a game world which combines science-fiction and fantasy, technology and magic.

THE SHADOWRUN SYSTEM

The game system is based around the six-sided dice — and is quite similar to that used in *Space 1889* and almost identical to the system used in the *Star Wars* RPG. To do something in the game, you have to make a Success Test by rolling a number

of D6 equal to your character's skill level and trying to make a Target Number equal to the difficulty rating of whatever it is you are trying to do. The dice scores are not added together. Each dice rolled is either a success or a failure. The greater number of suc-



Right: Zelenik's artwork for the cover of FASA's *Shadowrun* RPG Instruction Manual.

FASA's *Shadowrun* is exclusively imported to the UK by TM Games; principal distributor: Chart Hobby

cesses rolled mean that the action has been completed faster or more professionally.

In order to succeed at a task which is really important, the game allows the use of extra dice from Dice Pools. These Pools represent abilities in certain areas — such as defence, dodging, hacking or magic. The number of dice in these Pools relate to how good your character is in relevant abilities. The Pools are 'refreshed' each turn.

Although this may seem a little complicated, in practice it makes the *Shadowrun* system much faster than most other RPGs, since you can tell at a glance if you have failed or not. The use of the Dice Pool and the Skill Web (explained later) allows characters to have a chance at succeeding at whatever they try — an area in which many simpler D6 systems fail.

THE SKILL WEB

One item unique to *Shadowrun* is the Skill Web which enables a character to attempt a task in an area in which they are not totally skilled. The Web looks a bit like an electronic diagram with lots of resistors on it. Each 'resistor' is labelled with a particular skill. To use the Web, you simply trace a path from the skill you possess to the skill you want to use, counting the number of 'resistors' that you pass on the way. Each 'resistor' raises the Target Number required to be successful in the task you have set yourself by two. The character won't be able to carry out the function as effectively as if he or she had actually mastered that skill in a conventional manner.

CHARACTER CREATION

Shadowrun's character creation system is quite different to those you may have experienced before. Rather than having to roll up a character from scratch, you simply choose an archetype from the game book, write it up onto a character sheet and start playing. This ensures that all characters start at the same, equal, level. The designers have allowed for those of you not happy with the archetypes provided and have included a section on generating archetypes of your own, or ones you may feel the book has left out.

COMBAT

Combat requires players to make a Success Test in the weapon being used, with the character on the receiving end making a similar Resistance Test in order to reduce the severity of the damage. The combat system is well designed — although it has pitfalls. It can become dull for some



players, as characters with 'wired' or enhanced reflexes tend to dominate combat situations. Combat in *Shadowrun* isn't as 'deadly' as it should be either. In some circumstances, an unarmoured man can take ten shots from a pistol at point-blank range before he is killed. Both these problems can be overcome by a thoughtful GM who has a few spare moments to think up appropriate alterations to the rules.

MAGIC

Magic plays an important part in *Shadowrun*. There are two different magical traditions. Shamen — coming from the tradition of the Indian peoples — get their magic from the world of nature. They believe that animals, plants and Mother Earth have spirits which can be contacted magically. Shamen choose a particular animal as a totem — or familiar. This gives benefits to some spellcasting, depending upon the behaviour patterns of the 'real' animal. For example, a Shaman with a snake totem will not fight unless in self-defence or for food. Shamen are also most powerful in the natural habitat of their chosen animal.

Mages follow the Hermetic Tradition and see the universe as a complex of abstract forces. They are seekers after knowledge who often have huge libraries.

Magicians of both types have three distinct powers which ordinary folk do not. These are spellcasting, astral projection and astral perception. Spellcasting is the ability to draw power from the astral plane and focus it to do some task. Astral projection and perception allow the magician to enter the astral plane and observe or manipulate their surroundings.

Spells are divided into five categories: combat spells, detection spells, health spells, illusion spells and manipulation spells. Casting a spell is handled in a similar fashion to combat, however, in addition, the Mage or Shaman needs to make a

Willpower Resistance test in order to avoid fatigue as a result of spell-casting.

The magic system is well designed; magic is versatile, without destroying the balance of the game. It also has its own logic — something missing from many FRPG magic systems.

THE MATRIX

Another important concept in the world of *Shadowrun*, the Matrix is the dwelling place of the Decker, the futuristic incarnation of the computer hacker. To 'run the Matrix' your character needs a Matrix Imaging Cybernetic

SHADOWRUN CHECKLIST

Shadowrun (208pp, £17.95) — the original system sourcebook 'where man meets magic and machine'. This book features 16 full-colour pages and four pull-out reference sheets, plus a ten-page background to the *Shadowrun* universe. The illustrations and design of the book are high quality, as you'd expect from FASA. Well worth the asking price.

Seattle Sourcebook (175pp, £8.60) — the best supplement for *Shadowrun* about. There are spoof colour adverts detailing the many places to meet in Seattle. The book features information about the Redmond Barrons, Council Island — as well as all the other areas in Seattle. Each section is well designed with comments from Shadowrunners giving helpful hints and even more helpful warnings. This is one of the thickest of the sourcebooks and one of the best.

Sprawl Sites: One (133pp, £8.60) — this is a sourcebook featuring hundreds of brief encounters and location archetypes for many types of

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Interface Device or Cyberdeck — an interface between human or metahuman and the world telecommunications system. Cyberdecks can be used legally — in which case you need the correct passcodes to access an individual system. But, of course, you can use them illegally, which isn't too difficult if you've got the right hardware, one or two clever programs and a bit of luck! Most data is protected, of course — by Intrusion Counter Electronics (ICE). The deadlier the ICE, the more rolls needed to get past it. The Cyberdeck allows the Decker to visualise the telecommunications system nodes, processing units and data-stores as lines of light, or rooms pulsing with energy and geometric shapes. Any ICE encountered will attack in a pseudo-physical form, although you'll need a suitable utility program to fight back effectively.

Those of you familiar with the works of cyberpunk guru William Gibson will be in tune with this sort of behaviour already! The Decker can enter the Matrix and steal information from Megacorp databases. Not surprisingly, the companies didn't like this, and they employ their own Deckers and ICE to stop these hackers. The only criticism of 'Decking' is that it is a solo activity, and the rest of the gaming group will quickly get bored. This, however,

isn't the fault of the game, more the very nature of Decking. The GM can overcome this by staging the Decking session at the beginning or end of a gaming session while other players aren't involved in the action.

CRITICISMS

More space in the original sourcebook could have been devoted to general items relating to everyday lifestyle and entertainment — although this information does appear in later sourcebooks. By combining magic with modern

weaponry in a science-fiction setting, and then introducing fantasy races like orks and dwarves and even magical monsters, you may feel that *Shadowrun* is trying too hard to be all things to all players. Cyberpunk purists may feel that the inclusion of magic detracts from the stark plausibility of the 'dark future' setting. These are small criticisms of what is basically a highly detailed, well designed and extremely useable system. It should be popular with those people who feel they've grown out of *Games Workshop's Warhammer 40k*.



building: from bars to banks and shopping malls. The book also features more archetypes for characters, plus more contacts for Shadowrunners to meet. The addition of some more rules for credsticks and Sprawl Law make this supplement a good buy.

Street Samurai Catalogue (116pp, £8.60) — this details some of the not-so-common weapons and enhancements available. Many new weapon types are featured, including the awesome Acres Predator II with firepower ammunition. The new vehicles, armour and weapons will ensure players will never know what is going to happen next. The archetypes for all races of street samurai seem to be tremendously powerful and this makes me wonder if they were created using the same rules as the archetypes in the system book.

Paranormal Animals of North America (175pp, £8.60) — a fascinating and well-designed sourcebook packed with weird creatures which can be encountered in the Sprawls and beyond. Each creature is described and illustrated in depth — with a Shadowtalk section written as if 'runners' were communicating via a computer bulletin board. This provides

some street intelligence which pads out the straight descriptions. This is an excellent sourcebook, well worth the asking price and a must for *Shadowrun* GMs. There are some great colour plates depicting some of the creatures too...

DNA/DOA (64pp, £5.70), **Mercurial** (80pp, £5.70), **Dreamchipper** (78pp, £5.70), **Bottled Demon** (62pp, £5.95) — adventure supplements which, on the whole, are pretty good. Each adventure is linear in design, but this doesn't detract from the gaming fun to be had. All, apart from *Bottled Demon*, have a good mix of detective work, combats and problem-solving. *Bottled Demon*, the weakest adventure here, features a large amount of magic and isn't much more than a handful of combats.

Three-way GM Screen plus Adventure Book (32pp, £7.15) — the screen is nicely made of stiff-cardboard and the tables are handy for quick reference, but the adventure book isn't that great. I'm sure that an experienced GM could make a decent adventure out of it, but for beginners this package isn't recommended. It's also a bit

overpriced, due to the fact that VAT is added since it's not classified as a book.

STOP PRESS: We've just received a copy of the latest *Shadowrun* scenario called *Queen Euphoria* (74pp, £5.70) and hot off the presses from FASA. It features fast-food, a simsense star, kidnapping and an evil power so strong it threatens all mankind. Fabulous cover artwork and a topical and fast-moving adventure. Watch out for a full review soon. Also coming your way later this year is a boxed *Shadowrun* set called *Downtown Militarized Zone (DMZ)*, which is so new even we can't prise any information from the tight-lipped designers. More news as and when...

Shadowrun Products are available in the UK from Chart Games, Chart House, Station Road, East Preston, Littlehampton, West Sussex BN16 3AG. In the US from FASA Corporation, PO Box 6930, Chicago IL 60680. GMI would like to thank FASA and Chart Games for their considerable help in compiling this feature.

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